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ABSTRACT

The position paper on the evaluation of instructional materials by the Michigan State University Regional Instructional Materials Center for Handicapped Children and Youth (IMC HCY) examines the professional and ethical dilemmas of evaluation and presents evaluation policies of the center. Evaluated by a roster of field evaluators throughout the three state area are materials built, produced, or modified by the IMC HCY staff; products for which evaluation requests have been made through professional channels; and standard materials, replacements or augmentations, and promising innovative materials. Evaluations are published in a series of product opinion papers. (DB)

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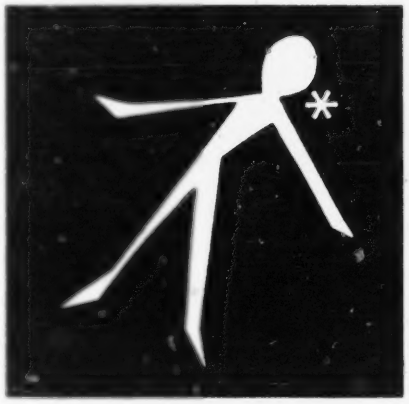

USOE/MSU
REGIONAL
INSTRUCTIONAL
MATERIALS
CENTER FOR
HANDICAPPED
CHILDREN
AND YOUTH

EVALUATION OF INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

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EVALUATION OF INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

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U.S. Office of Education – Bureau of Education for the Handicapped

USOE/MSU Instructional Materials Center for Handicapped Children and Youth

POSITION PAPER #1

--for distribution to evaluate,
other centers; others upon request--

EVALUATION OF INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

By virtue of proposal and grant agreements, the USOE/MSU Instructional Materials Center for Handicapped Children and Youth is committed to the evaluation of instructional materials for handicapped children and youth. While evaluation is neither the prime objective nor the major activity, it is a part of the essential mission of the center: to make available to teachers of handicapped pupils, reliable and useful information about the availability and effective use of instructional materials.

Why Evaluate? The concern for effective use of instructional materials obligates the IMCHCY to find ways to cause responsible formal evaluations to be made. One service may be provided by furnishing information to teachers about sources of materials and by describing them in such a way as to encourage teachers to use them. But which materials will the IMCHCY call attention to? Clearly in a day of burgeoning replication of gadget-oriented instructional materials it cannot be "across the board." The IMCHCY must guard against becoming a middle-man for producers and publishers--pushing willy-nilly everything that comes along. But neither can the IMCHCY claim the breadth and depth of expertise nor the testing resources needed to make a thorough evaluation of everything being offered for use today. Herein lies the professional dilemma.

The ethical dilemma is of a different sort. What are to be the obligations, rights and responsibilities of the IMCHCY to the producers and publishers with whom they seek to cooperate? Are these firms apt to seek pre-release professional opinions or field evaluations from the IMCHCY? If not, are they then "fair game" for critical review of their products?

Independent testing of educational products is not a well-established tradition. Educational leaders, teachers and school purchasing agents have an urgent need for unbiased opinions about the rash of printed materials and other paraphernalia of instruction. However, the atmosphere is charged--producers and publishers fear controls, arguing that controls spring from evaluations; consequently, they must resist evaluation. It is tempting to draw parallels from medical science and pharmaceutical research: it is not enough that professionally qualified men conduct the research and development efforts, they must also submit to independent monitoring and evaluation. Are learning, creative potential and mental health less valued than physical health?

The ethical issue is very much related to the integrity of a university. While the U. S. Office of Education may not wish to be cast in the role of evaluator of instructional materials, the IMCHCY has no real choice. The citizen-trust and professional esteem in which a public institution is held must be preserved. Evaluation must be conducted, to the limits of the objectivity of the researchers to the full extent of guarantees against irresponsibly appearing to endorse that which cannot be defended.

What to evaluate? Because the fields are too large, the markets too glutted and the back-log too great, selectivity is necessary. The first obligation of the IMCHCY is to evaluate whatever is built, produced or modified by the IMCHCY staff. When this concerns adaptations of equipment or materials produced by commercial vendors, the evaluations will study the strengths and weaknesses of the adaptations rather than the producer's original product.

The second obligation of the IMCHCY is to evaluate materials made through professional channels. For example, a school district may be considering the installation of a certain tape recording unit. If inquiry is made, the evaluation staff of the IMCHCY will make independent investigation,

consulting with present users of the machine in other locations, testing it on site or in the IMCHCY.

The IMCHCY's third obligation to evaluate centers around a rather routine activity: developing a series of Product Opinion papers for dissemination in the region served by the IMCHCY. In an attempt to minimize friction and misunderstandings with producers, the emphasis will be on evaluating materials and equipment which are a) standard already widely accepted in the field, b) replacements or augmentations offered for the standard materials, and c) promising innovative materials. Only those items seen as fulfilling one or more of these three criteria will be submitted to field test, but everything selected for field test will be reported in the Product Opinion publications of the IMCHCY.

A notable exception to these positive criteria will be evaluations which carry out the IMCHCY's "watch-dog" function--a constant alert against misleading or false advertising, inflated claims about the effectiveness of a material, and unfair comparisons of materials. The professional field is entitled to an agency fulfilling this lacking role: the IMCHCY assumes this responsibility.

How to evaluate? Evaluation of instructional materials is not a highly developed specialty. The research staff of the IMCHCY will address themselves to the development of new and refined techniques for materials-testing and evaluating in the laboratory and in the field. Meanwhile, an honest beginning will be developed around the use of field evaluators. Thus, for now, the criteria will be the responsibility of the IMCHCY and the judgements will be made by outstanding practitioners in the field. They will be asked to report on their use of the material in question--not just to estimate what its values may be.

An informed and responsible evaluation of the worth of an instructional material must describe the instructional context in which the material is functioning. Few instructional materials are good or bad in any absolute sense. An item may be good (in that it aids desired learning) in one use and very bad (it misleads or inhibits learning) in another use. Some materials even find their way into common acceptance for uses not originally intended or foreseen by their producers! Many teachers are skilled innovators and adaptors. Evaluation of materials must look beyond what producers say about their materials--but at the same time, producers must be held accountable for the claims they make.

Who evaluates? A roster of evaluators is maintained through the co-operation of regional and local-district materials centers throughout the three-state area served by the IMCHCY. These persons are known locally to be outstanding teachers of handicapped children and youth. Each local center participating in this program provides one evaluator in each of the following fields in which they have contact with strong programs.

1. visually handicapped
2. deaf and hard-of-hearing
3. educable mentally retarded
4. trainable mentally retarded
5. homebound, hospitalized and crippled
6. emotionally disturbed
7. children with learning disabilities
8. speech handicapped

The combined list is maintained in the IMCHCY; as the need arises for an evaluation of a material in a given handicapping area and at a given instructional level, two evaluators are selected in rotation from the appropriate portion of the list. These evaluators are asked to report within six weeks.

In many instances, especially if the material is 'standard' and in common use, the evaluators are already familiar with the material and can report very quickly. As soon as an evaluator has filed a report suitable for inclusion in the Product Opinions bulletins his name is again eligible for the random selection process in subsequent evaluator assignments.

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